Egg: Hot or Cold?

The egg is an important medical tool that is most commonly used by curanderos, within the Mexican culture. Curanderos are religious healers who use symbolic objects such as olive oil, water, and eggs to perform cleansing rituals that help cure and diagnose both humoral and thermal illnesses (Torres, 21). Diagnostic tools such as these are often classified according to their metaphoric and thermal properties. For example, in Ecuador, the guinea pig is considered ‘hot meat’ due to its ability to diagnose and heal illness; the idea behind this classification is also associated with the generation of energy, purity and nutritious qualities (Archetti, 55). The main goal of this paper will be to justify why the egg’s humoral temperature is cold, as opposed to hot when being used as a medical tool. First, I will explain the difference between metaphoric and thermal temperatures, followed by the importance of equilibrium within the human body. Then, I will point out the thermal imbalances mal de ojo causes and demonstrate why a metaphoric cold egg is needed in order for diagnosis and treatment to work. Finally, I will touch-up on empacho and similarly explain its relevance to a metaphoric cold egg.

According to George Foster, author of Hippocrates’ Latin American Legacy, there are two domains of temperature when it comes to illness: humoral and thermal. These two domains of temperature are in constant interaction with each other and affect the human system. By definition, “a thermal domain can be sensed and measured, and a metaphoric domain characterizes all foods, medical herbs and other remedies, and a number of other substances such as pottery glass and iron” (Foster, 22). Metaphoric temperatures apply only to material items, principally food, herbs, and other remedies: air and sun are excluded (Foster, 24). Putting it all together, thermal temperatures are real and humoral temperatures are metaphoric. And although these definitions come from Tzintzuntzan, a rural village in central Mexico, the same principles of humoral and thermal temperatures apply across Latin America.

Furthermore, Torres also emphasizes the importance of temperature equilibrium within the human body—he states, “The healthy body is marked by an evenly distributed warmth, an optimal equilibrium point on the temperature continuum that is a little closer to the got pole than to the cold pole.” Equilibrium is important because that is when the human body is considered healthy and safe from illnesses. Equilibrium, however, can be upset by excessive thermal or metaphoric temperature exposure or a combination of both. Activities that upset equilibrium are also known as insults and they can often place people “at risk” of an illness (Foster 33). Heating activities such as digestion of food, sleeping, physical exercise, emotional experiences, pregnancy, exposure to radiant thermal heat, ingestion of metaphorically got food and drink and external exposure to metaphorically hot substances (Foster 23). Equilibrium is also lost when the temperature is lowered. As Foster puts it, “Activities that are considered to be cooling include loss of warm blood because of menstruation, childbirth, surgical operations or accidents, external thermal chills from exposure to cold air or to water, ingestion of metaphorically or thermally cold food and drink, and exposure to external metaphorically cold substances.” Both heating and cooling activities mentioned above can sometimes lead to direct illness or put people at risk of illness. It is best to balance out these temperatures by eating proper food and balancing out the proper activities.

As stated before, equilibrium within the human body can be disrupted by a variety of hot and cold factors—some of which can be diagnosed or cured by the mystical powers of the egg. As Trotter, author of Curanderismo: Mexican-American Fold Healing puts it, “In curanderismo, some ritual treatments, especially those dealing with supernatural illness, demand that a sacrificial object be used, and the egg qualifies as an animal cell. These objects are believed to have the power to absorb the negative influences or harm (sickness) being done to the patient” (80). One of the reasons why I argue that the egg is metaphorically cold when being used as a medical tool is that the illnesses it cures are either thermally or metaphorically hot (Torres 24-26). It is not very logical to use a metaphoric hot object to diagnose or cure someone with a hot illness. The hot-on-hot interaction would be the same as applying salt to an open wound. The most common illness that is diagnosed and cured by the egg is known as mal de ojo (evil eye) or envy. According to the heat source classifications of Tzintzuntzan, mal de ojo is considered an external thermal threat—meaning that the heat is radiated from the outside (Foster 44). Mal de ojo can either place a person at risk of illness or cause direct illness, and it works in strange ways. As Foster puts it, “The heat of envy works in a very different fashion from most emotionally-based illnesses. The person emotionally-affected is not endangered, but rather she endangers a second person, the object of her envy, by casting mal de ojo, the evil eye” (53). Young infants are and toddlers are the most vulnerable to mal de ojo and the diagnoses and curing process is quite special.

There are different ways cleansing rituals are performed when trying to diagnose and cure mal de ojo. One way involves having the child lie down and sweeping him/her with an egg three times. Torres states, “the sweeping is done by forming crosses with the egg, on the child’s body, starting at the head and going to the feet. While sweeping, the healer recites the Apostles’ Creed three times, making sure that he sweeps both the front and the back” (23). Another curandero who was mentioned in Torres’ reading mentions that “you have to brush (the victim) with the egg first—make like a cress. The egg takes out the evil from the child and makes the person causing it stop… When the egg starts boiling that is when you know he had ojo” (Torres 24). As mentioned above, mal de ojo disrupts equilibrium by increasing one’s internal thermal temperature. The excess heat from mal de ojo, however, is absorbed by the egg during a cleansing ritual. During this ritual, the egg would have to be metaphoric cold otherwise, the cleansing would not work because a hot egg would most likely crack due to excessive heat. In contrast, a hot egg would fail to absorb the excess heat due to the hot-on-hot contact. Absorbing heat with a cold egg, however, would function like two magnets linking to each other (opposites attracting). Another way to think about this is the thought of inserting batteries into a TV remote. The TV remote will not work unless the positive ends of the batteries are matched with the negative ends and vice versa. This same idea can apply to the egg—hot can be thought of as positive energy and cold can be thought of as negative energy. Once this is true, the connection can be made between the ill body and the healing egg.

When I was about 4 years old, my grandma diagnosed me with mal de ojo. My symptoms included diarrhea, consistent sadness and refusing to eat properly. She suggested that I had been admired by someone without direct contact while I was out with my mom. I was sent to a well-known curandero living near Guanajuato, Mexico named Don Matias to receive a limpia (cleansing). During the cleansing, I remember feeling calm and relaxed. I was rubbed with an egg from head to toe multiple times. As I remember it, the egg’s temperature was a bit below room temperature and the room where the cleansing was performed was quite warm. A few days after the cleansing I was back to playing outside with my friends and eating properly. According to my grandma, my mal de ojo could have been prevented if the person envying or admiring me would have made physical contact. My grandma’s belief correlates to what Foster has to say about canceling out mal de ojo. He states, “There is one way, however, that people can admire an attractive infant of child and still foil the evil eye: they slap the child lightly on the face or buttocks, thereby symbolically disavowing their admiration and eliminating the heat” (Foster 57). If that physical connection is not made, then a cleansing is needed for precautions. Going back to the idea of opposites attract, it is reasonable to assume that the cold egg substitutes that physical connection, absorbing the excess heat mal de ojo causes and canceling it out.

Moving away from mal do ojo, the egg is also used to diagnose and cure empacho. Someone with empacho can suffer from constipation, diarrhea, or lack of appetite. It is often caused by eating too much food. According to Foster, the symptoms of empacho place people at risk of illness (44). To treat empacho, “An egg can be used to pinpoint the site of the blockage causing empacho. A Mexican-American mother whom Kiev interviewed, for instance, tells of her method of diagnosis: ‘To treat it, you rub their stomach real good and rub them with an egg at room temperature, not from the fridge, and then you rub their stomach real good with it. Whenever the egg bursts, that is where the empacho is in the stomach’” (26). It is reasonable to have the egg at room temperature while treating empacho because of the egg’s coldness. Once the egg’s temperature is raised to room temperature, it becomes more sensitive to heat. At this point, the egg’s humoral temperature is still cold but its thermal temperature is now warm. Since the goal is to locate the blockage of empacho by the bursting of the egg, a humoral cold egg will absorb the heat from the blockage but will crack once the blockage is found due to the excess heat of the already thermally warm egg. In this example, both thermal and metaphoric temperatures work together to accomplish the task of treatment.

Another thing to look at is other alternatives curanderos use to diagnose and treat hot illnesses. In southern Texas curanderos often use black chickens instead of the egg to perform cleansings (Trotter 80). In the Ecuadorian culture, the chicken is seen as one of the coldest meats because of its leanness and thinness. There seems to be a correlation of using cold objects to diagnose hot illnesses in the Mexican culture. It is safe to assume that most of the eggs used by the curanderos are chicken eggs. If the chicken is considered as a cold meat, then it is logical to suggest that the egg is cold as well. This heredity is yet another reason to assume that the egg is a cold medical tool.

In conclusion, the egg is a special diagnostic tool that is used extensively by curanderos. The conflict arises when trying to classify the egg according to its humoral temperature. It is an open-minded topic and the arguments could go either way but when examining the evidence and experiences mentioned in the readings, it is more reasonable to categorize the egg as a metaphoric cold medical tool. The fact that it diagnoses and treats hot illnesses while coming from a source of coldness (the chicken) justifies the theory of a cold egg.